

Global Opinions

How McConnell can shed his ‘Moscow Mitch’ label

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By Josh Rogin

Correction: An earlier version of this article misstated the two members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who voted against the Nord Stream 2 bill. They were Sens. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) and Rand Paul (R-Ky.). This version has been updated.

Just before leaving town for August recess, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) overwhelmingly [approved](#) a bill that aims to stop Russia from completing a new European gas pipeline that poses a threat to American, European and Ukrainian interests. If Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) wants to show he’s still willing to be tough on Russia, he should quickly bring this legislation to the floor when Congress returns in September.

McConnell is reportedly “[fuming](#)” after being tagged as “[Moscow Mitch](#)” by MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough and a “[Russian asset](#)” by Post columnist Dana Milbank. Both critics gave McConnell the epithet for blocking Senate consideration of several bills meant to address Russian interference in American politics and society. “For decades, I have used my Senate seat to stand up to Russia,” [McConnell responded](#), accusing his critics of “McCarthyism.”

The truth is, McConnell’s effort to block legislation related to election interference is more about defending President Trump than helping Russia. But if McConnell wants to “stand up to Russia,” at least on non-election-related matters, this bipartisan effort to thwart the Russian-German Nord Stream 2 pipeline project is his next test. The Senate Foreign Relations passed the “[Protecting Europe’s Energy Security Act of 2019](#)” last week by a vote of [20-2](#).

McConnell’s office declined to tell me whether he supports the bill or whether he will allow it to come to the floor. Absent McConnell’s support, there’s little chance the legislation could get a vote due to objections by Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky). At the SFRC business meeting last week, the bill’s main sponsor, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), explained the importance of trying to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from being completed, if possible.

The pipeline, which bypasses Ukraine, would deprive that country of billions of dollars of annual revenue and make it more vulnerable to Russian aggression, Cruz said. It would also make Europe even more dependent on Russian gas and give Putin a perfect tool to exert pressure on European allies, as he has often done in the past. He said Europe would be better off buying American liquefied natural gas instead.

“Russia has a bad history of using energy as a weapon. . . . Placing Europe in a position to face economic blackmail from Russia is bad policy and foolishness,” said Cruz. “Nord Stream 2 would generate billions of dollars in revenue for Russia at the expense of Europe and at the expense of the United States.”

The bill is designed to stop the construction of the pipeline (which is already two-thirds complete). Specifically, the bill would direct the Trump administration to sanction any company that is involved in laying deep-water pipe for the project. It was designed to target only two companies currently involved, one from Switzerland and one from Italy. There are only five companies in the world with the corresponding technology.

Cruz, who worked on the bill with Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), called the sanctions “precisely surgical.” The Russians don’t have deep-sea pipeline technology, Cruz noted, and since these companies are in such high demand, they will likely just move on to the next project rather than risk being sanctioned by the United States.

“And at that point, Russia has no means to complete the project,” he said, calling that result “good for Europe, good for America and bad for Russia.”

Several Senate aides told me there has been an intense lobbying campaign against the bill by the German government and the American oil industry. Nord Stream 2 is a wholly owned project of Russian energy giant [Gazprom](#). The German government has consistently rejected Trump administration complaints that the project makes Germany excessively dependent on Moscow.

Shaheen said the bill was meant to support transatlantic-minded Europeans in their internal political struggles, pointing out many of them don’t like the project. The European Parliament [voted in March](#) to oppose the project 402-163, stating in its resolution that the project “could reinforce the EU’s dependence on Russian gas supplies and threaten the EU’s internal market.” Former German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, now president-elect of the European Commission, has also [expressed concerns](#).

“This narrowly tailored bill is the Senate’s response to those with legitimate concerns in Europe, including many in Germany, who have been ignored,” [said Shaheen](#).

Last month, the chairwoman of the Ukrainian parliament’s foreign affairs committee, Hanna Hopko, [wrote](#) to Senate Foreign Relations Committee ranking Democrat Robert Menendez (N.J.), asking him to support the Cruz-Shaheen legislation out of concern for Ukraine’s fragile security.

The only committee members to vote against the Nord Stream 2 bill were Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) and Paul. Paul called the bill an abuse of U.S. sanctions power and said it would fail to stop the pipeline — while angering allies. Paul also spoke on behalf of major U.S. oil companies and the American Petroleum Institute, which all oppose the legislation.

Luckily, the bill’s future does not depend on Paul. But his objection does mean McConnell must take action to bring the bill to the floor and allow a vote. There’s no problem with the Trump administration; it is resolutely opposed to Nord Stream 2.

Since when has anything on Russia in Congress had such bipartisan and administration support? This is an easy way for McConnell to show he is still willing to stand up to Russia — and help Europe and Ukraine do the same.

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